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ABSTRACT

This study explores cultural influences in the first three months of life by comparing the daily experiences of first generation Chinese-American and European-American infants whose parents were born in the United States. The study focused on 10 Chinese-American and 10 European-American families whose mothers were recruited during the third trimester of pregnancy. Observations were conducted in the home when the infants were 3 weeks, 1 month, 2 months and 3 months old. Some of the findings of the study include: (1) mothers from Chinese and European backgrounds provided similar amounts of attention in caring for the infant's biological needs; (2) European-American mothers consistently introduced change and novelty into the microcosm of the infant's day, whereas Chinese-American mothers did not spend as much time redirecting the infant's attention or behavior; (3) European-American mothers modulated their behavior according to their infant's activity level, vocal output, and patterns of orality; (4) Chinese-American infants spent less time attending to people and smiling than did European infants of the same age; (5) European-American mothers more frequently used kissing to show affection than did their Chinese-American counterparts; and (6) Chinese-American and European-American mothers demonstrated few differences in the presence of a crying baby. (RJC)

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CHINESE-AMERICAN AND EUROPEAN-AMERICAN MOTHERS AND INFANTS: CULTURAL INFLUENCES IN THE FIRST THREE MONTHS OF LIFE

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The last 20 years have witnessed a slow, but steadily increasing awareness of the extent to which cultural background shapes the context of development. The early work concentrated on global contrasts. However, cultural identity remains strongly embedded within the American mosaic, permeating the lives of generations of Americans, and crossing socioeconomic boundaries.

Although still a minority from the stand point of population, the Chinese are a growing ethnic presence within the United States (Sung, 1985; Tsai, 1986). The census indicated that, as of 1980, there were four hundred forty one thousand persons who were born in mainland China, Taiwan, or Hong Kong living in the U. S., making the Chinese the third largest group of new immigrants. However, the growth of the Chinese community is not dependant on immigration, alone. In 1985, the U. S. National Center for Health Statistics registered 21,000 births to U.S. residents of Chinese background.

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Inspite of renewed interest in understanding the developmental pathway fostered by Chinese cultural traditions, analysis of childcare practices and patterns has been based primarily on interviews: interviews with adults, high school students and occasionally elementary school age children in Taiwan, (Chyou & Collard, 1972; Olsen, 1971; Scofield & Sun, 1960; Tsai, 1969; Wilson, 1970, Wolf, 1970, 1974), Hong Kong (Abbot, 1980), The Peoples Republic of China (Lee, 1987; Hu, 1988), and the United States (Borke & Su, 1972; Charos, 1981; Domino & Hannah, 1987; Krieger & Kroes, 1972; Sollenberger, 1981; Sung, 1985). Insights from these sources have reiterated the continuing influences of Chinese cultural values in the face of changing political and socioeconomic realties. Interdependence among extended family members and respect for elders are the repeatedly mentioned roots of social belonging within the Chinese ethos. Harmony is central to social relationships, as is the control of strong emotions and emotional displays. These values provide a marked contrast to the European-American emphasis on the assertion of individuality, the primacy of variety, and pleasure in the definition of interpersonal relationships, and the priority given to the skills of spontaneity, and effervescent and voluble sociability. From these divergent cultural ideals, one might assume that Chinese-American and European-American mothers begin to build their relationship with their infants from different basic sets of expectations governing interpersonal communications and responsibilities.

This morning I would like to present some initial steps in the

exploration of cultural influences on the first 3 months of life, in a comparison of the daily experiences of first generation Chinese-American infants, with their counterparts from among European-American infants, who like their own parents were born in the United States. At the onset of the study it was anticipated that Chinese-American mothers would act to:

1) encourage other family members to interact with the infant in order to facilitate the infant's incorporation into the broader family network.
2) subordinate infant centered behavior to the general needs of the family unit.
3) forestall the expression of extreme emotions by the infant, particularly negative emotions.

while European-American mothers would be more likely to:

1) seek to exaggerate the uniquely individual tendencies of the infant.
2) entertain the infant through changing stimulus.
3) provide opportunities for intensive social interactions.

Work by Dan Freedman (Freedman and Freedman, 1969) and others have pointed to the possibility of congenitally appearing differences in newborn temperament across delineated cultural groups (Freedman, 1974; Hsu et al., 1981). The study, being reported today, also sought to document the role of crying, self

quieting, smiling and social interest in the infant's behavioral repertoire within the natural home environment.

The study focused on 20 families (10 Chinese-American and 10 European-American) recruited during the third trimester of pregnancy through prenatal classes and Chinese Student Associations. Chinese background families with healthy newborns were accepted into the study if the parents indicated an interest or willingness to participate in the research endeavor. Each European background family whose infant's sex and birth order matched those of a participating Chinese-American newborn entered the study population as soon as the infant was born, provided that the infant was healthy and the timing of the home visits could be scheduled to correspond to that of the Chinese-American infant. The resulting set of mother-infant pairs were all from intact families in which the father was either a student or professionally employed. Each of the mothers had received regular prenatal care prior to the normal birth of her infant. Each of the groups included 5 male and 5 female infants. The Chinese-American mothers had lived an average of 5 years in the U.S. prior to this infant's birth, while their husbands had lived in the U.S. almost twice as long. Although both parents from each of these European-American families had lived in the U.S. all of their lives, a majority were no longer residing in the same community as their own parents.

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TABLE 1

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Home visits were conducted when the infants were 3 weeks, 1 month, 2 months and 3 months old with the timing of the visits in the morning or afternoon remaining the same throughout the duration of the study. Trained observers, naive concerning anticipated outcomes, visited both Chinese and European background families, recording in 30 second time units, the spontaneously occurring behavior of the infant, and the behavior of others as they interacted with the infant throughout the course of the continuous 3 hour long observation. Specific infant and maternal behaviors were coded according to their occurrence during these time units. Average observer agreements of 70% and average coder agreements of 75% were computed from records of both Chinese-American and European-American infants.

RESULTS:

Although the initial expectation of group differences in patterns of maternal and infant behavior was confirmed, these differences were set against a backdrop of similarities in the Chinese-American and European-American households established by the recurring rhythm of infant state changes and the regular demands of feeding and diapering the infant. There were no significant differences between the infant groups in the amount of time spent alert (eyes open) or asleep (eyes closed) at any visit; nor were there significant differences in the time spent feeding or diapering the infants. Although the majority of European-American mothers breast-fed their 3 week old infants while the majority of Chinese-American mothers bottle-fed their infants

($p \leq 05$), all of the infants were weaned from the breast prior to the 3 month visit. The only significant difference in the amount of time mothers spent providing liquid nourishment occurred during the one month visit, when European-American infants spent more time nursing or taking a bottle ($p \leq 02$) than did their Chinese-American counterparts. This visit was also the only time during which the Chinese-American infants, as a group spent more time crying or fussing ($p \leq 04$). At none of these visits was there any indication that the infant groups differed in the time it took them to stop crying, either by themselves, or after their mother responded to the cries. However, Chinese-American mothers did spend more time in the same room as the crying 3 month old. Mothers were present at each of the scheduled home visits. There were no differences in the number of instances during which mothers relied on other family members to take on caregiving duties.

Both infants and mothers contributed to the characteristic behavior patterns exhibited when the infant was alert. The earliest difference appeared in the realm of infant behavior. The 3 week visit revealed European-American infants spending more time with hands or objects in mouths (oral exploration, visit 1, ($p \leq .03$) than the Chinese-American infants the same age.

As early as 3 weeks of age, eyes open smiling began to appear more frequently in the behavioral repertoire of the European-American infants than in the recorded behavior of the Chinese-American infants ($p \leq 10$). By the 3 month visit this difference reached statistical significance ($p \leq 01$). Beginning at 1 month of

age and continuing through subsequent visits, European-American infants were observed attending to people more frequently than their Chinese-American counterparts at each visit (attends person, visit 2, $p \leq .05$; visit 3, $p \leq .007$; visit 4, $p \leq .007$), inspite of having people equally present in the same room as the awake infant.

The Chinese-American mothers generally refrained from interrupting the ongoing flow of the infant's behavior. With the exception of visit 1, when "mother looks" ($r = .69$, $p \leq .05$) and "mother talks" ($r = .89$, $p \leq .01$), correlated with the infant alert time among the Chinese-American mother-infant dyads, the behavior of Chinese-American mothers exhibited no correlation with infant alert time. In contrast, some form of European-American maternal behavior correlated with infant alert state at each visit. Although there were no differences in the total time alert infants spent in the crib or in the mother's arms, European-American mothers were more frequently adjusting the physical location of the infant (visit 2, $p \leq .02$; visit 3, $p \leq .001$; visit 4, $p \leq 09$).

The caregiving patterns of the European-American mothers suggest that they adjust their behavior with the infant to match identified infant behavioral propensities; that is their behavior is in some sense primed by that of their infants. European-American mothers of more active 3 week old infants spent more time calming them at 3 weeks ($p \leq .03$) and then at 3 months ($p \leq .01$). Mothers of more vocal 3 week old European-American infants spent more time talking to them at 3 weeks ($p \leq .05$) and again at 3

months ($p \leq .05$). European-American infants who spent more time with hands or objects in their mouths (oral exploration) at 3 weeks had mothers who subsequently provided them with less non-nutritive oral stimulation at 3 months ($p \leq .01$). Among the Chinese-American dyads, the relationship of maternal and infant behavior was age specific. Chinese-American infants who attended to people more at 3 weeks had mothers who spent more time talking ($p \leq .05$) and looking ($p \leq .05$) at them during this particular visit. At the 3 month visit, attending to people among the Chinese-American infants was correlated with calming behavior on the part of their mother ($p \leq .05$). No significant differences between the two groups of mothers was evident for total duration of maternal talking, looking, or calming behavior at either the 3 week or the 3 month visit or for duration of infant vocalization and time spent physically active at those visits. In the presence of the observer, Chinese-American mothers were less demonstratively affectionate with their infants than were the European-American mothers who more readily incorporated kissing into their exchanges with their infants (visit 2; gives affection, $p \leq .02$).

DISCUSSION

The research began with questions concerning cultural influences on infant experiences that required translating cultural directives into potentially observable maternal and infant behavior. The role of family, the saliency of individual needs and the emotionality of interpersonal relations are complex issues

whose tangles can only begin to be loosened in a limited study of this nature.

Many questions are left unanswered concerning the observable role of extended family members during the first 3 months of the infant's life. Both the Chinese-American and the European-American mothers in this sample may be unusual in their physical distance from extended family. Approximately half of the mothers from each group reported that they visited with the infant's grandparents only once a year or less.

In the tasks involving caring for the infant's biological needs, mothers from Chinese and European backgrounds provided similar amounts of attention. This similarity is of particular interest in the current comparison since the time period studied overlaps with the 1 month postpartum period identified through traditional Chinese practice as a time when a woman should limit her activities, including caring for the infant (Pillsbury, 1982).

In the area of infant time management, a coherent pattern of differences emerged. The European-American mothers consistently introduced change and novelty into the microcosm of the infant's day by relocating the infant, and adjusting the infant's position. Complimenting this tendency, was the early acquisition of furnishings for the infant's use. Changing tables, infant swings, and infant seats were more frequently present in the European-American households providing a focus for infant and maternal entertainment. Chinese-American mothers did not spend as much time redirecting the infant's attention or behavior, nor did maternal

behavior among the Chinese-American group vary according to infant awake time beyond the first visit. This suggests that Chinese-American mothers were not attempting to adjust their own and their families routine around the infants changing periods of wakefulness.

The importance of individuality was already in evidence in the interactions of European-American mothers with their infants during the first 3 months of life as mothers modulated their behavior according to their infant's activity level, vocal output and patterns of orality. Individual control over the components of oral behavior develops rapidly after birth and would thus provide one of the earliest means for infants to gain information about their environment. Not only did European-American infants spend more time engaged in oral exploratory behavior, but also their ability to access this experience on their own appeared to influence the extent to which their mothers supplied non-nutritive oral stimulation, thereby demonstrating maternal willingness to allow the infant independence of action.

Although 3 month old Chinese-American and European-American infants had equal access to people in their homes and rooms, Chinese-American infants spent less time attending to people and smiling than did European-American infants the same age. This observed difference in attention to people may derive from an <u>active</u> and <u>selective</u> use of experiences. Other researchers have reported significant and stable individual differences in smiling rate and onset of social milestones (Freedman, 1974; Freedman &

Keller, 1963; Tautermanova, 1973) that may argue for a biologically based interpretation of differences in the initial production of socially pivotal behavior, a difference which may then be augmented through patterns of interpersonal interaction. Kagen and his collaborators observing in an American day care setting also noted differences between Chinese and American toddlers in this social sphere (Kagan, Kearsley & Zelazo, 1980). Although no differences were observed in the amount of time that Chinese-American and European-American infants spent vocalizing, the vocal behavior of the infants appeared to be a salient aspect of infant behavior for the European-American mothers, whose own talking time correlated with infant vocalizations.

European-American mothers more frequently employed kissing as a means of showing affection than did their Chinese-American counterparts. Other researchers have discussed the confusion that Chinese high school students expressed when they compared the formality of their relationship with their immigrant parents to the emotionally demonstrative aspects of American culture (Sung, 1985).

Chinese-American and European-American mothers demonstrated few differences in the presence of a crying baby. Nevertheless, Chinese-American mothers' reliance on calming as a nonverbal mode of communication is consistent with the goal of tempering emotionality in interpersonal relationships.

For each mother, the encounter with her newborn is influenced by a set of ideals which may initially limit possible interpretations of behavior. However, these guidelines may have

been shaped by the adult community's experience with a particular range of infant propensities.

As with all cultural encounters, each viewer carries a filter that assists in interpreting or distorting the cues in plain sight. Hopefully, research such as this may assist practitioners, as well as researchers, in becoming sensitized to the cultural component of caring for a young infant.

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TABLE 1

FAMILY BACKGROUND

	Chinese-American	European-American
Number of subjects	10	10
Number of first-borns (total)	5	5
Male	2	2
Female	3	3
Number of later-borns (total)	5	5
Male	3	3
Female	2	2
Fathers' Mean Age (years)	32.9	31.5
Mothers' Mean Age (years)	28.8	29.5
Mean highest grade of school completed by mother	16.2	17.1
Mean highest grade of school completed by father	18.2	18.9
Mean number of years married	5.2	4.9
Number of families visiting grandparent generation		
1 time per year or less	6	5
Between 1-4 times per month	2	5
Every day	2	0
Mother's religious orientation		
Buddhist	2	-
Confucian	3	-
Protestant	3	3
Catholic	2	2
Jewish	0	5
Father's occupational path		
Pursuing graduate studies	4	2
Engaged in post-doctoral studies	1	2
Professionally employed	5	6
Number of mothers breastfeeding infant		
Visit 1	2	8
Visit 2	0	1
Visit 3	0	1
Visit 4	0	0